

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

COLLECTION IN CONTEXT

H O P P E R

I N P A R I S

JUNE 23 - SEPTEMBER 19, 1993

“Hopper in Paris” is the first in a series of exhibitions featuring key works in the Whitney Museum’s Permanent Collection. The art presented in this series will sometimes constitute well-known icons, sometimes underrecognized gems. We hope that the intimate scale and thematic specificity of these exhibitions will encourage concentrated viewing and reflection as well as offer the pleasure of discovery.

The purpose of the series is not to isolate the works exhibited but rather to set them in two different but related contexts: first, as products of their original time and place; second, in terms of their relevance to contemporary critics and today’s audiences. For this reason, guest curators, artists, and critics will



*Interior Courtyard at 48 rue de Lille,
Paris, 1906*

participate in a number of the exhibitions, providing fresh voices and a variety of viewpoints that will help resituate these works in the history of twentieth-century American art.

“Hopper in Paris” is an appropriate initiation for this series since Edward Hopper (1889–1967) has long been identified with the Whitney Museum and its collection. He had his first one-artist exhibition in 1920 at the Whitney Studio Club, a precursor to the Whitney Museum, and his paintings were included in the first Whitney Biennial Exhibition and in numerous subsequent Annuals and Biennials. *Early Sunday Morning* (1930) entered the collection as part of a core group of works

purchased in advance of the Museum’s opening in 1931. In 1970 the Museum received Hopper’s entire artistic estate as a bequest from his widow, Josephine Nivison Hopper. Consisting of more than 2,500 oils, watercolors, drawings, and prints, ranging from Hopper’s student days to his later years, it is the largest gift in the history of the Museum.

“Hopper in Paris,” highlighting the artist’s first serious body of work, is one of several “Collection in Context” exhibitions to be devoted to Hopper in coming years. We are grateful to Richard R. Brettell, consulting director of the Dallas Museum of Art and noted scholar on Impressionism, for his fresh appraisal of Hopper’s little-known Parisian work.

Adam D. Weinberg
Curator, Permanent Collection

This exhibition is sponsored by the Lobby Gallery Associates

Edward Hopper tried later in his life to downplay the significance of his early travels to Paris, and many “Americanists” have joined him in this stubborn and independent provincialism. Yet, for any “Europeanist,” the Paris trips of 1906–07 and 1909 were of critical importance, not just for what he made (which was of considerable quality and originality), but also for what he saw, read, heard, and experienced. Indeed, Hopper’s entire aesthetic of urban alienation and isolation as well as his virtual obsession with architecture might very well have stemmed from the time he lived essentially alone in the great French capital, with only marginal spoken French, and without a cadre of sympathetic friends.

When he arrived in Paris in October 1906, Paul Cézanne had just died, and the great Salon d’Automne—with its three full-scale retrospectives devoted to Gustave Courbet, Eugène Carrière, and Paul Gauguin, respectively—was in full tilt. Luckily, Hopper had a place to stay with a French family on the rue de Lille in a quiet Left Bank neighborhood known for its art shops, galleries, old streets, and studios. The Louvre was a five-minute walk across the Seine, and the Musée du Luxembourg, with displays of pompous contemporary art, was only a little further in the opposite direction. The huge exhibition galleries of the Grand Palais were fifteen minutes to the west, and Hopper undoubtedly went there immediately to see the Salon d’Automne.

We can only imagine how overwhelmed Hopper must have been by that exhibition. The chance to see more than a hundred works each by Courbet and Gauguin would in itself have been worth the long ocean crossing. Yet the simultaneous encounter with numerous paintings by Henri Matisse, André Derain, Albert Marquet, Henri Manguin, Maurice Vlaminck, and other young Fauve landscape painters must have been a kind of visual assault on the young American.

Hopper’s own first works show a real resistance both to Fauve painting and to its most important source, the aesthetics of color exaggeration practiced by Gauguin. In fact, the first paintings Hopper produced are virtually monochromatic studies of the constricted streets and staircases where he lived. They are painted on small panels and none contains figures or even signs of life. Indeed, they look more like the stark interiors of the Danish painter Vilhelm Hammershøi than anything he saw at the Salon d’Automne!

Like all expatriates, Hopper was introduced to Paris by fellow countrymen. His friend Guy Pène du Bois, with whom he had studied at the New York School of Art, had arrived the previous year. There is little doubt that the bilingual Pène du Bois was the one who had encouraged Hopper to go to Paris and, once there, provided him with advice and perhaps even introductions.

But it was the presence in Paris of another friend from his New York classes, Patrick Henry Bruce, that gave the shy Hopper direct access to all the private galleries as well as to the most adventurous collectors in Paris. Indeed, all evidence indicates that Patrick Henry Bruce himself was making his entrance

into the brilliant international society around Gertrude and Leo Stein during the early part of 1907, just months after Hopper arrived in France. Compared to Hopper, Bruce was a perfect expatriate—wealthy, recently married, easy with the language, and socially adaptable. Hopper, by contrast, was resolutely middle class, uneasy in French, and reticent. Despite Bruce and Pène du Bois, Hopper's time in Paris must have been typical of that of many foreigners who live alone, wander on their own, and become oddly comfortable both with their own nationality and with their alienation from France.

Most of the superb paintings Hopper did on the 1906–07 trip were made on the quais along the Seine near his apartment. Unlike the Fauve painters who surveyed the Seine from above as part of an urban panorama, Hopper either couldn't afford or was unable to find a river bank studio. As a result, his paintings are earthbound, clinging to the quais, the city looming above or spreading laterally. His viewers look up at the bridges, and his barges and boats crowd the foreground, pushing toward the viewer and blocking access to the middle ground. In *Bridge in Paris*, the best of the small panel paintings of the autumn of 1906, Hopper crowds a bridge onto the pictorial surface. He located himself on the edge of its deep, recessive arch and staked the entire picture on the interplay between the dark gray-browns of the bridge and the brilliant red circle of a newly installed stop sign for boats. I cannot think of a single French riverscape that dares so much on a single pictorial decision—and succeeds.

As if in partial response to the Salon d'Automne and to the many other exhibitions in Paris, Hopper's canvases of late 1906 and early 1907 became larger, lighter in tonality, and more confidently painted than the small 1906 panels. The sludgy yellow-green water of the Seine dominates most of the foregrounds, and the city itself is arranged across the pictorial surface with a simple, geometric clarity unseen in French cityscapes until Matisse's later Paris views of 1911–12. Hopper was also almost aggressive in his avoidance of the brilliant palettes of the young French painters. Indeed, only the controlled, restricted palettes and simple pictorial organizations of Marquet, whose work Hopper saw not only at the Salon d'Automne, but also in a large one-artist show at the Druet Gallery in February 1907, seem to have appealed to the young American.

The spring of 1907 apparently liberated Hopper's brush. His productivity and the size of his paintings increased, as did their force. The starkest of them, *Le Parc de Saint-Cloud*, cannot be connected with the work of any of the Fauves. Only in certain Cézannes of the 1870s does one feel a comparably rigorous composition. None of these, however, was exhibited in the first great Cézanne retrospective at the Salon des Indépendants in March–April 1907. In fact, Hopper's painting is so startlingly bold and original that art historians struggle to find prototypes. It is easier to link this geometric pictorial ordering with much later images by Fairfield Porter and Richard Diebenkorn than it is to find parallels in any earlier or contemporary French paintings.

Are Hopper's paintings therefore "American"? The answer is most probably yes. No Frenchman was quite so easily capable of perceiving Paris in so structured or diagrammatic a way; and no matter how orderly and "abstract" certain Nabis and Fauve paintings of Paris seem to be, they always somehow register as "Parisian." By contrast, Hopper's paintings are "Paris" without being in the least "Parisian."

Perhaps the most startling demonstration of this ambivalence is *Le Bistro* of 1909. Here, Hopper represents the Quai Voltaire looking west down the Seine toward the Pont Royal. Various Fauve artists had painted this area of Paris, but none of them approach Hopper's defiant rejection of the beauties and subtleties of the great capital. A young man and a woman sit alone at a table in what surely must be the Café Voltaire. The table seems almost to sit on the street, which is empty of any vehicular or pedestrian traffic and shines blindingly white in midday light. The buildings themselves are in deep shadow,



Le Pavillon de Flore, 1909

in contrast to those further down river, which face the same direction but are lit as if by a solar search light. What viewer who had never been to Paris would recognize this place, would know that no trees remotely like these oddly Tuscan tubes could ever have grown there? And who would imagine that the pale purplish-blue lozenge just above the bridge to the right is, in fact, the glorious rows of trees in the Tuileries Gardens?

Upon his return to America, Hopper is reported to have said that "it seemed awfully crude and raw here when I got back. It took me ten years to get over Europe." One wonders just what he meant when he implied that he needed to "get over Europe." And why ten years. Oddly, 1919 was the end of World War I, a war centered in Europe and experienced safely by Hopper in the United States. Moreover, all evidence indicates that Hopper was not "over Europe" even in 1919. In fact, his first one-artist show of 1920 included sixteen paintings, eleven of which had been painted at least a decade earlier in France! And a beautiful Christmas drawing made in 1923 for his future wife, Josephine Nivison, represents a couple at a large window contemplating a twilight panorama of Paris dominated by the towers of Notre Dame. Below the drawing is an evocative quotation from the French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé.

There is little doubt that much of Hopper's aesthetic was forged as an expatriate in France. His letters home, with their vivid descriptions of Paris streets, carnivals, and cafés ("The people here seem to live in the streets, which

are alive from morning to night...”; “everyone goes to the Grands Boulevards and lets themselves loose...”), contrast so utterly with his paintings of urban emptiness that one must remember that the missives were meant to reassure his mother. Decades later, Hopper spoke with the critic Brian O’Doherty: “Whom did I meet in Paris? Nobody....I used to go to the cafés at night and sit and watch. I went to the theater a little. Paris had no great or immediate impact on me.”

Yet the paintings indicate the opposite. Virtually every aspect of Hopper’s later oeuvre finds its roots in Paris, and the surviving student work done in New York before his Parisian experience seems today almost as the work of another artist. Like many expatriate painters, Hopper could become himself in Paris because he had the time alone to think and paint and because he



Notre Dame, No. 2, 1907

did that thinking and painting in such a challenging environment. Very few great American painters of the twentieth century were able to see as much important French art in so short a time as Hopper, and virtually everything Hopper himself said about art in later years evolved from French aesthetics of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist periods. In 1945, he wrote a short essay that defined his painting. “My

aim in painting,” it begins, “has always been the most exact transcription possible of my most intimate impressions of nature.” A little later in the essay, he said that “great painters, with their intellect as master, have attempted to force this unwilling medium of paint and canvas into a record of their emotions.” Either of these sentences could have been written by Pissarro or Cézanne or even Matisse!

It is time now to look afresh—and in a truly international way—at Hopper’s Paris years, to read and reread his letters, to attempt a better chronological arrangement of the paintings than the one we have now, to better analyze the exhibitions he saw, and to consider the ways in which Hopper himself exhibited and “used” these works later in his career. Indeed, Paris was perhaps more important for American art in the years before the Great War than it had ever been, and Hopper, for one, became a great American artist in Paris.

Richard R. Brettell

Works in the Exhibition

Dimensions are in inches;
height precedes width.
All works are from the
Permanent Collection
of the Whitney Museum
of American Art.

Bridge and Embankment,
1906

Oil on wood, 13 x 9 1/4
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1298

Bridge in Paris, 1906
Oil on wood, 9 5/8 x 13
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1305

*Interior Courtyard at 48 rue
de Lille, Paris*, 1906
Oil on wood, 13 x 9 5/8
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1304

Paris Street, 1906
Oil on wood, 13 x 9 3/8
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1296

*Stairway at 48 rue de Lille,
Paris*, 1906
Oil on wood, 13 x 9 1/4
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1295

Statue Near the Louvre, 1906
Oil on wood, 13 x 9 1/4
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1306

Steps in Paris, 1906
Oil on wood, 13 x 9 1/4
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1297

*Two Figures at Top of Steps
in Paris*, 1906
Oil on wood, 13 x 9 1/4
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1299

Cunard Sailor, 1906–07
Watercolor on composition
board, 14 13/16 x 10 5/8
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1335

Fille de Joie, 1906–07
Watercolor on composition
board, 11 13/16 x 9 7/16
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1324

*Parisian with Wine Bottle and
Loaf of Bread*, 1906–07
Watercolor and graphite on
composition board,
15 x 10 1/2
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1329

Canal at Charenton, 1907
Oil on canvas,
23 1/4 x 28 1/4
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1246

*Gateway and Fence,
Saint-Cloud*, 1907
Oil on canvas, 23 x 28
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1231

Louvre and Boat Landing,
1907
Oil on canvas, 23 x 28 1/4
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1249

Notre Dame de Paris, 1907
Oil on canvas,
23 1/2 x 28 1/2
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1179

Notre Dame, No. 2, 1907
Oil on canvas, 23 x 28 1/2
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1222

Le Parc de Saint-Cloud, 1907
Oil on canvas,
23 1/2 x 28 1/2
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1180

Le Pont des Arts, 1907
Oil on canvas,
23 1/16 x 28 1/16
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1181

Pont du Carrousel in the Fog,
1907
Oil on canvas,
23 1/4 x 28 1/4
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1245

*Tugboat at Boulevard Saint
Michel*, 1907
Oil on canvas,
23 3/4 x 28 5/8
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1250

Le Bistro or The Wine Shop,
1909
Oil on canvas,
23 3/8 x 28 1/2
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1187

Écluse de la Monnaie, 1909
Oil on canvas, 23 1/4 x 28
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1178

Le Pavillon de Flore, 1909
Oil on canvas,
23 1/2 x 28 1/2
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1174

*Le Quai des Grands
Augustins*, 1909
Oil on canvas,
23 1/2 x 28 1/2
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1173

River Boat, 1909
Oil on canvas,
37 15/16 x 48 1/8
Josephine N. Hopper
Bequest 70.1190

Cover: *Notre Dame, No. 2*, 1907 (detail)



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